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Going with the Grain: Why Great Harvest Chose Montana — Twice



Dillon, Montana, is a hub for world-class fishing, a gateway to Montana's western heritage and a town of approximately 4,000 residents. It's also the world breadquarters of [Great Harvest Bread Company](#), which has more than 200 franchise bakery cafés across the country (plus one across the ocean on the Northern Mariana Islands).

From the Dillon franchising office, Great Harvest helps its franchises to be successful from the moment they're established. Services include a "boot camp" in which new franchise owners come to Dillon to learn at the office's test bakery; a suite of digital communication tools, so the franchises can stay in touch with them and each other; marketing support; and even a dietician who helps franchises with nutrition labels for their original recipes.



In 1976, Pete and Laura Wakeman purchased a bakery in Great Falls after falling in love with Montana during backpacking trip from their home state of Connecticut. Unknown to them at the time, it would become the first of many Great Harvest locations. Enjoying their success and being asked by friends and colleagues how to replicate it, they started offering franchise opportunities a short two years later.

In 2001, the Wakemans sold the business to now-CEO Mike Ferretti and a group of investors. Ferretti, who resided in North Carolina at the time, originally hesitated to buy it because of the distance from where he'd planted roots with his family.

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After he got to know the company and its people, he decided to move forward, initially planning to solve the distance problem by relocating it to another small town in North Carolina.

"We knew that it wouldn't fly to move it to a big populated area," he said. "My thought was, if you're given a good opportunity, of course you'll move. And... nobody would. Of the 21 or 22 that were on the payroll at that point in time, literally only one said that they would voluntarily move."

And so Great Harvest remained in Dillon.



Today, the franchising office employs approximately 30 staff, most of which work out of Dillon — although times have changed. Through advances in technology, such as video conferencing, and expansion of air service to Montana, it's increasingly possible to work with employees from remote locations while remaining well connected. Today, Great Harvest also employs staff in other parts of Montana and even elsewhere around the country.

"Being based in Dillon, Montana, and having franchises in 45, 46 states, we have always relied on technology to be able to communicate with our franchisees and then that's kind of grown as we've had remote employees," said Chief Administrative Officer Debbie Huber. "It's very important to us to make sure we have the best people in positions. So, if we can get them and they live in Great Falls, then let's do it."

Huber, who herself is originally from Great Falls, returned to Montana after school in New England and settled in Dillon for the job.

"I was ready to get back to Montana, to open spaces, and I applied for a job at Great Harvest," she said. "Dillon has been a great place to raise our family. Raising kids in a small town has been a blessing, and I'm glad that we've been able to be a part of this community."



According to Huber, she isn't the only one:

"We have several employees that have been here for 26, 27, 30 years because Dillon has been a great fit for them. So, once you find the employee that it's a great fit for, we're very loyal to Dillon and we stay here."

Great Harvest has also made great use of Montana resources, not the least of which is wheat from the Golden Triangle, which Huber calls "the Napa Valley of wheat" for its incredible baking qualities.

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Additionally, the company contracts with Montana technology businesses for essential parts of its operations. Wisetail of Bozeman provides a learning management system, while Dolce Software of Missoula provides labor management solutions.

Now, 17 years later, Ferretti said he can't imagine the company being anywhere but Montana.

"It's just a delightful, lower key place to live and work," he said. "It doesn't have the hustle and bustle. It's a great business environment. It's different than having a company in the northeast or the northwest. It's a different vibe. It's a different personality. And the work ethic is still absolutely off the charts good."

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